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ABSTRACT

What does one do when one's colleagues return from abroad with grandiose plans that they hope to superimpose upon our educational system? For such a grafting process to be successful, it must be realistic and we must acknowledge that early perceptions are inclined to become tempered by the length and breadth of exposure. Analysis of both British and American systems of education reveals that neither culture has the "better" system, but that each might benefit from each other's assests. During the author's recent sabbatical, he saw that the British system is marked by (a) the profound dedication of British teachers, most notably on a primary level, (b) a highly discriminating process of admission to universities, (c) infrequent opportunities for teacher professional advancement, (d) an emphasis on art and music in primary and secondary schools that could well benefit American education, and (e) a tradition of morning assemblies that has an appeal because of the cohesiveness it seems to foster between administration, faculty, and students. American observers have created a false illusion in emphasizing the "informality" of British education. The "new" British primary schools may be physically new, but philosophically they are the result of the almost imperceptible on-going evolution of a one-thousand year tradition. (JS)

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BRITISH EDUCATION: THE MYTH AND REALITY

by

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During a recent sabbatical-leave period spent at a British college of education I made a point of re-reading a number of critiques of American education. Being away from America for three months and becoming totally immersed in the British system of education seemed to engender a sense of objectivity and perspective which drew me toward these American-authored critiques. Some of these works, when first read in the comfortable isolation of my personal day-to-day routine, did not appear to be profound enough to warrant serious introspection, or, in contrast, seemed to reflect an inaccurate indictment of rationale, technique, or context.

The American lecturer abroad, I found, is forced by circumstance to re-evaluate his educational value system (indeed, his entire value system!) which is perceived by foreigners, unfortunately, as a subset of the American "condition." The foreign educator's mind-set regarding our system of education can range from the incredibly naive "tabula rasa", through the war-time and television-inspired stereotyping, to the remarkably well-informed.

The problem of dealing with these diverse mentalities in a positive and educative manner, while, at the same time, at risk of being pedantic and over-bearing, is a Kissinger-esque task at the very least.

I re-read Silberman's chapter six, "The Case of the New English Primary Schools," with particular interest and new-found insight.

It was easy to recall the romanticized and adolescent Summerhillian views of my undergraduate years. Views which were shed as the molting process of maturity forces an outgrown "skin" to be replaced by a more suitable rationale. Such metamorphoses are encouraged by the publication of essays written by "well-informed" professional peers.

However, what does one do when colleagues return from abroad with grandoise plans they hope to superimpose upon our educational system? Plans which were obtained in many cases through the experience of being led through a small number of "model" schools and unconsciously making the mistake of generalizing from what was seen and seeing only what was shown.

The psychological tendency during a short-term exposure to a foreign system seems to be to try to glean what appear to be the positive attributes and then to generically apply them toward improving one's own system. The resultant hybrid is envisioned as being the best of both situations; that is, if the grafting procedure is successful. Actually, in order to be successful this synthesis must first be realistic and we must acknowledge that early perceptions are inclined to become tempered by the length and breadth of exposure. The human foible of immediately gravitating toward what seems to be the most expedient solution to what one perceives as one's problem is nearly impossible to resist.

The genesis of a national system of education, any national system of education, must be looked at in relation to the myriad factors which were and are acting upon it. It should be seen as the evolution of a component part of an organismic phenomenon. A phenomenon whose homeostasis will be upset by mindless renovation. Such change can prove to be counterproductive at the very least.

One has the feeling that many American observers abroad have not, in fact, acquired an overview of their own educational system. They see "new"things abroad that have been in practice at home for years, often within their very own school systems.

I did not feel competent enough to write a word comparing the American and British systems for a period of months. Even after that period of assimilation my writing was due in large part to the need to vent the frustrations which were caused by the aforementioned critiques.

The reader should note that Silberman's work, in particular, is not at issue here. For, although his monumental work has become somewhat dated in certain respects, the reporting of his personal experiences in the English schools seems to very accurately reflect the schools as I saw them more than five years later. My argument is focused upon those self-styled experts (some were used by Silberman to reinforce his position) who feel compelled to grasp at apparent panaceas as the result of whirl-wind study-tours of British education.

These experts often mis-interpret the jargon as used by English educationists. The terms "integrated day," "integrated curriculum," "free school," "open school," and "informal education," serve as neat vessels which may be filled by a wide ranging variety of substances which, indeed, may vary from one school to the next.

The colloquial education-ese, as I found it, can shroud rather than clarify meaning. It is, as MacLuhan might call it, a "cool" medium which seduces the listener into supplying his own definitions. This is more a sin of inference than of implication and is fostered by administrators who appear to be "put off" by frequent requests of clarification.

After some months of subjective observation a number of strengths and weaknesses of the British system seemed to bob to the surface. It became increasingly obvious that neither culture had the "better" system but that each might benefit from the other's assets.

I do not suggest, however, the renovation of either system. I do suggest innovation beyond mere tinkering within the context of each time - established society. Innovation which might evolve after lengthy introspection and incorporated from within such that no erosion of equilibrium might occur.

I was deeply impressed by the dedication of British teachers, most notably on the primary level, who seem to display a personal commitment of time and resource which is too rarely seen in the United States. This fervor, on the other hand, was directly linked to an inordinate level of personal autonomy to such a degree that most faculties seemed to lack the administrative synthesis and concommitant focus upon educational objectives which should be arrived at collectively.

On the secondary level particularly, it seemed that beyond the course syllabus each teacher maintained an isolated "feifdom" which might or might not be congruent to any over-all rationale. The over-emphasis upon covering enough material to enable students to obtain passing grades on "O" level or "A" level (ordinary and advanced levels) cumulative standardized examinations within the various programs of study was pervasive and seemed to foster an unofficial but sometimes acknowledged and readily perceived caste system of students and teachers alike.

The importance of the national examination system of college admission (which serve as dams through which only a highly selective trickle is allowed to flow) coupled with the dependence upon the expertise of "6th form" (advanced secondary) teachers seems to inculcate, as a by-product, an enviable degree of cultural teacher veneration.

This highly selective process of admission to universities and, to a lesser degree, colleges of education is quota-based and is accompanied by a comparatively low rate of student attrition. One might be inclined to question the over-all impact of higher education upon British society because of the screening process which appears to discriminate against a vast segment of the population which might prove worthy on a performance basis. This group contains late-maturing as well as under-achieving students in addition to in-service professionals and other adults seeking personal edification.

Opportunities for professionals (teachers, in particular) to pursue advanced degree work on a part-time basis are rare. This may be true in part because of the high level of job security and short probationary period (one year) before achieving what would be considered tenure in the United States. Once this probationary year is successfully completed the teacher's position is relatively secure for the remainder of his professional career barring, of course, severe financial exigencies within the local school district. The same is true for administrators, for, when a headmaster is "sacked" it is an occasion for national press coverage at great depth.

This situation will change drastically, I feel, within the next five years due to the dynamics of teacher supply and demand.

England is beginning to experience the teacher-surplus era that the United States entered during the late 1960's. With such a surplus, especially in selected subject fields, Local Education Authorities will begin to fill vacancies more discriminantly giving rise to higher desires for in-service attainment and the resultant emergance of "new" college programs to accommodate this externally imposed professional incentive. This

progression will soon begin to manifest itself by increasing numbers of college students opting for the four-year Bachelor of Education degree which will displace the three-year Qualified Teacher Certificate now prevalent.

In a more positive sense, our American "way" of education could indeed benefit by looking closely at the emphasis of art and music in the primary and secondary schools. It seems that the space race sparked in 1957 by Russia's Sputnik is still leaving its mark on our children in the form of escalated science and mathematics programs. The British did not have to overcome the self-imposed stigma of a tarnished technological national pride as we did in America during the late 1950's and early 1960's. (Seemingly contradictory, we appear to be far behind England in the implementation of computer education courses in the secondary schools.)

The British tradition of a morning assembly of the entire school population for such purposes as special notices, programs, non-denominational prayers and hymns appealed to me because of the cohesiveness it seemed to foster between administration, faculty, and students. I must admit, however, to being a victim of acute nostalgia in the sense that this practice closely resembled and rekindled recollections of my own early school years.

In conclusion, I would like to return to an important question which was implied earlier.

If it is true that my observations are remarkably similar to Silberman's experiences of more than five years ago, what has transpired in British education in the interim?

Beyond the changing of the names of secondary schools from "grammar" to "comprehensive" or the names of primary schools from "infant" and "junior" to "first" and "middle", have significant changes occurred?

I fear that American observers have, in fact, created the illusion that the "informality" of British education (especially in the primary schools) is a planned phenomenon designed to systematically raise societal standards through education. To the contrary, I find that it is, in actuality, a very slowly evolving by-product of that culture which seems at best to be a societal buttress and reinforcer of the status quo. The "new" English primary schools may be physically new, but philosophically they are the result of the almost imperceptable on-going evolution of a one-thousand year tradition.

The task of separating the myth from the reality of British education must be confronted and overcome if, through the observation of that "model", we hope to qualitatively improve American education.